

Peremhelyzetben III.  
Romológiai írások

In Marginal Position III.  
Writings from the Field of Romology

## Studia Cingarorum 5.

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# Peremhelyzetben III.

Romológiai írások

# In Marginal Position III.

Writings from the Field of Romology



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ANIKÓ VIDA

## Benefit recipients or citizens?

Changes in the notion of unemployment in Hungarian  
parliamentary debates in two decades: 1991–2011

### INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the discourse about the rights and responsibilities of social aid recipients is a sensitive barometer of the social climate. Contemporary public discourse often connects poverty, particularly living on benefits to personal and moral defiance. The discourse stigmatizing disadvantaged groups does not only provide a basis for curtailing the rights, but afterwards to justify the restrictions. Moreover, stigmatizing public discourse contributes to blaming disadvantaged groups, especially Romas. There are some examples of this from the recent past of Hungary. According to László Palkovics, under-secretary of educational affairs, education and knowledge are not important to poor families. In that sense, only their attitudes are responsible for their low achievement and dropping out. Another well-known and scandalous statement has been made in Hungarian public policy. Péter Harrach, one of the leaders of the Christian Democratic Party, said that leaving for school in the morning without breakfast is characteristic of the lifestyle of poor families.

In the present paper, by following the steps of Trace, I will attempt to give an overview about the semantic changes of unemployment in the most important parliamentary debates focusing on the legislation of unemployment benefits in Hungary. The main goal of the analysis is to identify the normative framework of the minutes. Furthermore, the study presents the symbolic forms of exclusion, searching for an answer to the question: How does public discussion about benefit recipients promote the violation of their full citizenship?

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE METHOD USED

For the purpose of my analysis, I chose the Trace method, which is about tracing and analysing normative frameworks in policy texts. I was first introduced to the

social political aspects of the Trace method at an international conference organized by the Peace Institute in Slovenia, more than 10 years ago. At this conference, Professor Selma Sevenhuijsen from Utrecht University demonstrated the Trace method that she had developed for analysing policy documents. In this, the policy materials can be regarded as the mediators of a normative paradigm. In her article on Dutch health policies, Selma Sevenhuijsen defines normative paradigms as follows: a set or group of knowledge which systematically describes social problems in order to pave the way for social regulation and legislation. Therefore she suggests that the different policies should be viewed as forms of government. (Sevenhuijsen, 2002)

### How to work with Trace

The very first step is selecting the text. Trace is suitable for policy documents, parliamentary minutes, reflective background materials, articles and books. To apply Trace properly, we have to know some relevant characteristics of policy texts. Firstly, analysis with Trace has to face the fact that policy makers usually insist on the notion of a “value neutral state” and of the supposed objectivity of their own work. Denial of normativity naturally does not imply that moral concepts and moral arguments are absent in policy documents. They are scattered throughout the document, hidden between the lines and wrapped in empirical or statistical statements and “facts”. The other side of the coin of denial of normativity is that values and moral arguments are often taken as self-evident, as givens that do not need further argumentation and justification. Based on these criteria, policy texts are full of contradictions and inconsistencies. (Sevenhuijsen, 2004)

The *Trace* method consists of four steps: 1) tracing; 2) evaluating; 3) renewal; 4) proposing new policies. Every step is subdivided into several topics and questions. It is important to note that it is not always possible to answer all these questions or to address them in the presented order. For the purpose of my paper and due to the limitations of space, I will use the first and second steps of this method.

### Tracing

The goal of this step is to identify the normative frameworks that are actually at work in the text. The main topics of this step are the following:

*Text production:* The aim here is to establish under which rules of text production the text is conceived. Who is speaking to whom here, with what authority and with



which power relations? This can be traced by asking the following questions: Who are the authors of the text and under whose responsibility is it produced? Which moment does it occupy in the policy process?

*Problem definition:* To determine the normative framework of a policy document, we have to see how the problems waiting to be solved are defined. In most cases, these definitions do not approach social problems in an objective way without judgment, but they contain several normative presuppositions. This can be traced by asking the following questions: What is the relationship between the problem and the proposed solutions? What is the justification of the policy: normative or empirical?

*Leading values:* It can also be a good starting point for getting acquainted with the normative paradigms which determined various policy papers or parliamentary minutes if we examine and uncover the value-based argumentation in the document's text: its leading values, their interconnection and their assigned role in the whole system of the document.

*Human nature:* By mapping out these values, we can also learn what presuppositions appear in political documents concerning human nature. One of the most influential notions in late modernity is that of the self-interested, calculating individual. According to this notion citizens are primarily rational beings who make life choices by calculating the economic gains and losses of different life options. Consequently, behavior that deviates from this concept is easily qualified as "irrational."

*The role of the state:* Policy documents apparently contain notions about the role of the state and the division of responsibilities between state agencies, private institutions and individual citizens. These concepts also can be viewed as an essential dimension of normative frameworks.

*Rhetoric:* The above points of analysis can be supported by looking at rhetorical characteristics of the text which implies tracing the following elements: Does the text contain "typical sayings," and, if so, what role do these perform? Does the text contain dichotomies and metaphors and, if so, what do these have to perform? Usually policy texts also display taboos. The same goes for inconsistencies and contradictions in the problem definition, values and courses of action. (Sevenhuijsen, 2004)

## Evaluating

In this part of the analysis we make some evaluative remarks about the normative dimensions on policy documents. Firstly, it is important to determine which

political philosophy underpins the text in question. In all cases it is essential to try to evaluate which approaches are dominant, and which ones play subsidiary or marginal roles. This leads to the second question in this phase that reflects on the adequacy of the text. This implies an evaluation of the social knowledge that informs the documents: which sources are used for its statements, where do they come from, and is there any alternative knowledge that are apparently ignored? Does the report show any sensitivity to the power relations? Here power can be analysed in different ways, for example the effects of dependency, the accessibility to social resources and question of inequality in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity. What are the inclusionary and exclusionary effects in this respect? What forms of proposed intervention are seen as justified and acceptable and which ones are rejected in the framework adopted? The main goal of this step is to make an overall judgement of the text and to place this where possible in notions of citizenship. (Sevenhuijsen, 2004)

#### BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS

In the analysis, only the bills and laws were included from the last two decades that brought a fundamental change in the unemployment benefits in their amount and in the conditions for receiving them.

##### 1. Employment Act 1991. No. IV.

Since the former regime denied the existence of unemployment, there was no, or only symbolic legislation about unemployment. The history of Hungarian unemployment legislation started in 1991.

##### *Problem definition*

According to the majority of speakers in parliamentary debates<sup>1</sup>, the essence of the problem results from the transitional period and the social-economic crisis of the previous regime. Among other reasons for unemployment, MPs mentioned the inflexibility of the Hungarian labour force. This was as attributed to the dysfunctionality of the Hungarian education system, not to the unemployed themselves. The MPs' emphatic attitude can be explained by the changes

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1 Sources: Sessions of the parliamentary term 1990-1994. [Online].  
<http://www.parlament.hu/naplo34/071/071tart.html>  
<http://www.parlament.hu/naplo34/076/0766076tart.html>. [26 July 2011]

in the composition of the unemployed, namely the increasing ratio of skilled and qualified people. Many speakers of the debate mentioned negative stereotypes concerning the unemployed and the lack of social solidarity as problems.

### *Leading values*

In order to understand the normative paradigms that define different policy programs, it is a good starting point to explore the value-based arguments in the text and the relationship of these values and their role in the whole of the document. The necessity of social solidarity was strongly emphasized in the debate. According to the MPs, it is a basic right for everyone except those who lost their workplace due to their own fault. Vulnerable groups include those who dropped out of public education. Since these unqualified people lost their social security, they were not entitled to unemployment benefit. In their case, members of the opposition parties urged state responsibility suggesting that poverty is not primarily the problem of individuals. References to individual rights as well as human autonomy and dignity were common in their speeches. This can be explained as political euphoria after the regime change. To sum up, fundamental rights were dominant in MPs' arguments.

### *Human nature*

The majority of speakers regarded the unemployed more as victims of the socio-economic changes than responsible for their own position. In contrast to public opinion, Hungarian politicians of the time denied the stereotype that unemployed people are idle and useless members of society. The image of worthless benefit recipient appeared in only one MP's speech. The notion of human nature is more diverse than *homoeconomicus* and people's secondary needs (e.g. desire for respect and recognition) were considered as important as their material needs.

### *Rhetoric elements*

Typical expressions in the debate referred to the historical importance of this legislation process and its European quality. The pathetic atmosphere of the debate can be attributed to these facts. Politicians, regardless of their parties, agreed that not only did the new legislation provide social protection for the unemployed but it also created social and economic integration for them. Among the rhetorical elements, the dichotomies are of great significance, since these are examples of a hierarchical way of thinking. Consequently, one side of these dichotomies are preferred to the other, undervalued side. These dichotomies are: the unemployed –



the idle unemployed; usefulness – uselessness; centrally planned economy – market economy.

### *Evaluation*

Respect towards the negative rights of the unemployed was emphasized in the Parliamentary debate. Consequently, the management of the unemployment system, their integration were to be achieved by humanistic measures protecting their dignity. These aims were to be realised by incentives instead of sanctions and punishment. Politicians drew attention to the importance of social services and psychological support. Integration disorder was only mentioned as the consequence of unemployment and not as a deviancy. The statements were based on sociological researches and statistical data. Both the legislation and the Parliamentary discourse targeted the extension of the rights of the unemployed and their empowerment.

## 2. The “Pathway to work” program – 2008

This was the year when the attack on benefits and benefit recipients started. The “Pathway to Work” program was partly launched because of interethnic and social conflicts in the most disadvantaged regions and communities. The program was planned to rely on the means of public work much more extensively than before. One of the most important aims was the strict implication of ‘work-test’, which was based on compulsory public work and not on employment in the labour market.

### *Problem definition*

The majority of speakers in the parliamentary debate<sup>2</sup> considered low employment rate and the growing number of the permanently unemployed not to be a primarily economic or social problem but a tension between the social support system and the “world of work”. They believed that the greatest problem was the amount of aid, which ordinary people in disadvantaged regions and communities considered too high. The referred “data” about the amount of social aid came from reports of the media (tabloid) and calculations published on the Internet. Different parties also agreed that the relatively high amount of aid was the reason for the increase in unemployment and in the passing on a “recipient lifestyle” from generation to generation. So only those poor people who are unable to work should enjoy the

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2 Sources: [http://www.parlament.hu/internet/plsql/ogy\\_naplo.naplo\\_fadat\\_aktus?p\\_ckl](http://www.parlament.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_naplo.naplo_fadat_aktus?p_ckl)  
Sitting 179, 181, 182, 184, 186 [15 December 2008]

financial form of social solidarity. The conservative opposition parties (today the governing party) would require complying with some “community” requirements to pay the allowance and they would stress some elements of sanctioning and controlling.

### *Leading values*

Traditional social democratic values such as solidarity and social justice appeared to be redefined in a patronising way. The basic principles that define EU policies and national development plans, such as equal opportunities and social inclusion, rarely appear in the parliamentary debate. Traditionally accepted social democratic values such as solidarity appear in a special interpretation as “solidarity on the principle of needs”, which contains the conditionality of normative support and the principle of reciprocity. Also, the meaning of social justice differs greatly from distribution justice that is usually referred to in social policy. The participants in the debate understand it as “meeting the sense of justice of honest people living off work”. In other words, it was the means to legitimize the cutting back of social benefits.

### *Human nature*

The acknowledgment of individual freedom rights (negative freedom) as a value and the respect for human autonomy appeared only in the arguments of the members of the liberal party. The most often mentioned values referring to human nature were connected to individual responsibility, reputable work and lifestyle. It is not difficult to recognize the features of coded racism behind the comparison between reputable families living off their work and families settling for social support. The gender-specific version of anti-Gypsy stereotypes appeared in the form of having babies for the sake of the benefits.

### *Evaluation*

One of the hidden agendas of the bill is to keep the number of people living on benefits on the same level and to decrease the tensions, mainly the anti-Gypsy feelings at local levels. The majority of the parliament would definitely tie social citizenship to legal employment and to complying with a lifestyle adequate to community requirements. Unemployment has almost completely become the individual’s responsibility. It can be interpreted as the suspension of the unconditional right to existence, especially in the case of the most vulnerable groups in society.

### 3. Public Employment Act 2011 No. CVI

It made the eligibility criteria stricter than ever by adding compulsory public work as a condition of payment. Additionally, the social allowance of long-term unemployed persons in Hungary dropped by 20% from 28.500 HUF to 22.800 HUF (approx. 100 EUR to 80 EUR) in 2012. Another radical change was the requirement to complete a minimum period of employment of 30 days per year. In this way, the responsibility was shifted to the aid recipient while local opportunities shrank.

#### *Problem definition*

Both the low rate of employment and the high rate of inactivity were attributed to the dysfunctionality of the welfare system. The principle of less eligibility was emphasized in the debate<sup>3</sup>. It is not regarded as an incentive but rather an enforcement to work. The representatives belonging to the ruling party expected from this new bill not only the reintegration of the long-term unemployed but the restoration the 'ethos of work' as well. Consequently, the solution to the problem is to reform the malfunctioning social benefit system. In fact, it means the re-education or re-socialization of the unemployed, forcing them back to the 'world of work'.

#### *Leading values*

In the debate, the need to differentiate among unemployed groups appeared in an explicit way. Since then, different unemployed groups have been treated in unequal ways. The principle of 'equal pay for equal work' was ignored by the legislators. Their starting point was that public employment wage should be less than the minimum wage. Tying unemployment benefits to certain conditions was regarded as an unquestioned value. Since then, the opposition parties have also agreed to this principle, but they questioned only the way to realise it, stating that the necessary conditions are insufficient.

#### *Human nature*

Participation in the paid labour market is not only the prerequisite of social citizenship but it is also the measure of physical and mental health. Consequently unemployment – more precisely, the lack of legal work – has become a moral stigma. While in the earlier debates and acts the ethnicity of the long-term unemployed

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3 Sources: [http://www.mkogy.hu/internet/plsql/ogy\\_naplo.naplo\\_fadat\\_aktus?p\\_ckl=39&p\\_uln](http://www.mkogy.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_naplo.naplo_fadat_aktus?p_ckl=39&p_uln) [26 July 2011]



appeared only in an implicit way between the lines, in this debate, gypsies were labelled as the target group for compulsory public work.

### *Rhetoric elements*

One of the new elements in the debate was the use of war rhetoric. *“At present, Hungary has to struggle with two enemies: one is state debt and the other is unemployment.”* Another new element in this debate was that instead of social integration, the catching up of those lagging behind appeared. This latter phrase suggests a totally different image of society and different social-political implications. The emphasis is placed on individual responsibility instead of state responsibility. In this sense, catching up means the requirement to conform to major social norms. In the debate, only public work appeared as a chance of employment for the most vulnerable groups. The necessity to increase part-time work opportunities for mothers was not mentioned, neither were the facts of labour market discrimination, especially against Gypsies, nor the black economy.

### *Evaluation*

The idea of “duplicate citizenship” was made into a law already in the “Pathway to Work” program, but the legal amendments adopted in 2011 consisted of rules on possible elements of lifestyle and behaviour as well for the recipients. The compulsory participation in public work explicitly became a tool for discipline. Its aim was the socialization of those who are not willing to or not used to working. The new legislation served as a diversion from living on the dole. The suggested measures belong to the symbolic political world which convinces the majority that recipients do not get something for nothing.

## SUMMARY

The legislative changes faithfully reflect the social context of a given period, which in this case is negative public opinion towards benefit recipients, who are regarded as Gypsies by most people. The most important consequences of bills discussed and passed over the past two decades are the recognition of unemployment by society as a fact. However, from its “European style” regulation, we have come to the denial of unemployment and to the creation of laws which increasingly ignore the principles of security and solidarity as well as fundamental human rights such as dignity, autonomy, equal opportunities and equal treatment.

Finally, it is essential to note, that for the improvement of the employment opportunities of the vulnerable groups who are permanently excluded from the labour market, some symbolic steps should be taken also, such as the recognition of the full social membership and the basic rights of human dignity. One of the most important elements of this could be giving the community-wide respect. If human dignity occupies a central place in social policy, the most important task of the state in this regard would be to create caring and accepting social media for the deprived groups. (Chan, 2004) But it is not only a state responsibility. Furthermore, it is our common interest, because if we do nothing, it could have serious social risks.

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